

Introduction to Postcolonial Ecocriticism Among Settler-Colonial Nations

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Abstract: The introduction to this special issue considers the intersecting concerns of postcolonialism and ecocriticism as well as the complexities that divide the two fields. Inspired by ongoing non-literary events that highlight the irrevocable link between humans and the environment, the special issue recognizes the ways in which ecocriticism can inform achievable and effective strategies for postcolonial critics and activists. The assembled essays, which focus on literatures from settler-colonial nations, offer fresh ways of negotiating the intricacies of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Keywords: postcolonialism, ecocriticism, environmental justice, literature, settler-colonial nations

A search of the Modern Language Association database (as of January 2014) for postcolonialism and ecocriticism results in articles and books by, among others, the ground-breakers and established names in the merging fields since the 1990s: Graham Huggan, Susie O'Brien, Simon Estok, Rob Nixon, Helen Tiffin, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Laura Wright. Each of these critics offers foundational yet different approaches to considering the intersecting concerns of postcolonialism (a long-established critical theory) and ecocriticism (an established but relatively young critical theory). We are delighted to feature O'Brien and Estok in this special issue. The remaining featured authors (and guest editors) are much indebted to these scholars' mentorship, innovation, and ongoing work in the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism; however, we

also feel, in the spirit of good scholarship, the pull to engage with the established critics' ideas and expand the critical ground by introducing new voices and directions. A key motivation for this special issue is a desire to create space for new perspectives and methodologies reflective of twenty-first century social and environmental concerns.

We are also inspired by ongoing non-literary events that urge critical reflection informed by both postcolonial and ecocritical theory. The 2012 Marikana miner's strike near Rustenberg, South Africa revealed a long-standing tension between multinational mining corporations and workers mining for platinum and highlighted economic and social disparity more than two decades after the legislated end of apartheid. When members of the South African Police Service responded to strikers' protests with violence on a scale not witnessed since the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the legacy of colonialism became impossible to ignore. In North America, protests against oil pipelines and hydraulic fracturing (fracking) have been dominated by First Nations and other Indigenous groups whose treaty rights continue to be violated in favour of corporate interests. The people affected by these decisions and practices—the dozens of miners killed in Marikana; the Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish, and Musqueam nations in British Columbia; the Elsipogtog nation in New Brunswick; the Khoisan fighting fracking in the Karoo region of South Africa's Eastern Cape—remind that the effects of colonialism reverberate well into the twenty-first century, particularly for Indigenous peoples. So long as the “post” in postcolonialism serves to recognize those reverberations—and not, as some critics have argued, to imply that colonialism has ended or that Indigenous knowledges are meaningful only following European contact—postcolonial strategies remain helpful in the face of neoliberal policies and neocolonial realities. They also demonstrate the unavoidable link between humans and the environment. Shaft and strip mining, tar sands extraction, pipeline construction, fracking—all of these practices affect the environment as well as the people who live at or near the locations of these practices, not to mention those further afield. For that reason alone, ecocriticism offers significant strategies for postcolonial critics and activists.

Some words about our national focus are warranted here. Rather than open this special issue up to articles about any and all postcolonial literatures, we have limited our scope to consider literatures from settler-colonial nations. In part, we are acknowledging the ways these regions have tended to be considered together as “white settler colonies” with shared histories as Commonwealth nations. We are assuming, after Annie E. Coombes (2006), that the similar “administrative structures and civic institutions” provide a basis from which to begin considering the heterogeneous ways in which settler colonials in Canada, Australia, and South Africa positioned themselves vis-à-vis Indigenous communities (1). We think that the cohesive potential of remaining focused on these nations outweighs the potential represented by widening the focus even further, and we hope that this special issue will invite others to extend like-minded and contentious critique to scholarship about the Caribbean, Mexico and South America, Africa, the South Pacific, and Asia. Indeed, Simon Estok moves in the direction of Asia in this issue’s Afterword. Through a meditation on Indigenous and corporate interests and a weaving of this issue’s article contributions, Estok further adds to the complexities of negotiating postcolonial ecocriticism.

But what is ecocriticism’s role in this emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism? Far from a strategy that privileges nonhuman over human concerns, ecocriticism is a conceptual model cognizant of cultural-material intersections. As a simple definition, ecocriticism examines the representation of and relationships between the biophysical environment and texts, predominantly through ecological theory. Environment and text are both inclusive categories: environment comprises flora and fauna, soil and water, climate and weather, industry and commerce; texts comprise artefacts as diverse as literature, film, the Internet, journalism, policy papers, rocks, spoor, and trees. As there are many different “texts” to study, so are there many different theoretical and critical approaches to ecocriticism, and no sustaining, overarching theoretical paradigm or methodology. While this pluralistic approach often borrows from the natural sciences, a critical eye tempers that alliance. Ecocriticism turns to other ways of knowing and knowledge production—material, experiential, cultural, and embodied knowledges—in order to interrogate

many of the ethical issues science produces and often overlooks due to its adherence to and faith in objective fact. Ursula Heise claims that what holds ecocriticism together is its “triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world” (506). This three-part structure invites intersections with and divergence from postcolonial theory, which tends to focus on strategies for undermining dominant ideologies that make living, for marginalized people, unsustainable.

Ecocriticism, like other critical theories that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, absorbs and informs strategies concerned not only with science but also with philosophy, ethics, history, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, and, as this special issue attests, postcolonialism. “Unlike feminism or postcolonialism,” Heise contends, “ecocriticism did not evolve gradually as the academic wing of an influential political movement” (506). Environmental history and philosophy beat ecocriticism to the punch, and its late emergence in the 1990s has led to a divergent set of methodologies even as its practitioners share a “common political project” (506) of thinking and writing toward a more sustainable world. This project requires varying degrees of emphasis on the material conditions that shape both biophysical and cultural worlds.

Ecocriticism differs from postcolonialism in its application of non-anthropocentric models (ecocentricism, posthumanism, biocentricism) that situate the human as part of, rather than apart from, the biophysical environment. This non-anthropocentric focus can draw accusations that ecocritics care more about trees and endangered species than they do people. Yet by focusing on how the biophysical environment is represented in relation to the human, ecocriticism challenges many of the assumptions the humanist tradition supports and perpetuates, particularly entrenched anthropocentric views that alienate nature from human culture. As such, ecocriticism’s contemplation of the (organic and inorganic) nonhuman reconsiders what it means to be human and the ethics that support or deny such reconsideration. These ethical concerns expand human rights discourse, particularly in attempts to reconcile en-

vironmental justice and environmentalist movements. One challenge ecocriticism faces in academia is to translate these ethical concerns into models of activism, and we see crossover with postcolonial studies as one way to address this challenge.

In “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,” Rob Nixon argues that the schism between the two fields persists for four reasons. First, postcolonialists have tended to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation. Ecocritics, on the other hand, have historically been drawn more to discourses of purity: virgin wilderness and the preservation of “uncorrupted” last great places. Second, postcolonial writing and criticism largely concern themselves with displacement, while environmental literary studies have tended to give priority to the literature of place. Third, and relatedly, postcolonial studies has tended to favour the cosmopolitan and the transnational. Postcolonialists are typically critical of nationalism, whereas the canons of environmental literature and criticism have developed within a national (and often nationalistic) framework (Nixon’s own discussion, for example, focuses on the United States).¹ Fourth, postcolonialism has devoted considerable attention to excavating or reimagining the marginalized past: history from below and along borders, such as transnational axes of migrant memory. Within much environmental literature and criticism, by contrast, history is repressed or subordinated in the pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature (Nixon 235).

Because of the respective anthropocentric and ecocentric emphases and disciplinary histories, crossover between ecocriticism and postcolonialism meets with much resistance from traditionalists, particularly when models of activism (or lack thereof) become the issue under scrutiny. As we note above, this tension in the humanities in settler-colonial nations appears to play out in many similar disagreements and hostilities that emerge between environmentalist (wildlife/habitat preservation or conservation prioritized at the expense of social concerns) and environmental justice (social and environmental concerns prioritized equally and in connection to one another) movements. Often, these debates fall back on historical precedents. Western environmentalist movements traditionally emerge out of the Anglo middle-class. Environmental jus-

tice attempts to balance both social and environmental interests with a clear understanding that the health of a community depends on the two negotiated together and responds to the exploitation of disenfranchised cultures and classes that are too frequently represented by Indigenous peoples. In fact, environmental justice seems the natural bridge between ecocriticism's focus on environment and postcolonialism's focus on people, particularly given its mandate to emphasise how the two are indivisible. Despite each discipline's ostensibly divergent focus, we cannot neglect one over the other, but must link—must think—the two together. Environmental justice offers a point of convergence because it foregrounds the interconnections between human and land-use management and exploitation that accentuate the misguided notion that the *post* in postcolonialism implies that many cultures are free of colonialism. Indeed the *post*, as the articles in this collection demonstrate, reminds us that settler-colonial nations continue to colonize in their complicity with neoliberal global capitalism. Through their participation (some would argue collusion) in and encouragement of multinational corporate interests, the settler-colonial nations on which this issue focuses remain accomplices in sustaining control over cultural and economic inequities.

Political alliances between environmental justice and environmentalist movements respond and offer alternatives to these global economic forces and their inequitable environmental and social outcomes, and literary studies would benefit from a similar disciplinary alliance. Interdisciplinary exchange among other humanities and environmental sciences offer compelling perspectives of ecology, animal ethics, and environmental philosophy and history, which can shift much theoretical ground in ecocriticism. Postcolonial concerns such as cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, the anthropocene, migration, trauma and affect, and border studies are now more pronounced in ecocriticism; similarly, animal studies, bioethics, and trans- and post-humanism are more prevalent in postcolonialism than they have been in the past. This crossover reflects the growing recognition of the exploitation and unequal distribution of resources as both local and global concerns. As many Indigenous justice movements attest, the global south/north is

not a hemispheric division, for such conceptualization de-emphasises localized practices of exploitation directed toward Indigenous peoples, even within so-called industrialized nations such as the settler-colonial nations discussed in this special issue.

A significant initiative that exemplifies a disassembling of that global south/north dichotomy is the “Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth,” which came out of the 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Drawn up by those who live with the consequences of global capitalist exploitation—namely, Indigenous peoples and their allies—the declaration proposes a more equitable positioning between environmental and social concerns that disproportionately affect Indigenous populations. Despite this noteworthy document, however, there still seems to be a consensus that environmentalist movements (particularly those with wide global reach and concerns that tend to focus on the preservation of nonhuman nature, often arguably at the exclusion of concerns for human welfare) remain at odds with environmental justice groups, particularly as environmentalist movements tend to be run by white, middle-class people far removed from the affected area or species (e.g., WildAid and the World Wildlife Fund). Conversely, environmentalists have accused environmental justice movements of privileging human concerns over the nonhuman. As Kevin Michael DeLuca claims in his polemical essay “A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans”:

[T]he main concern of the environmental justice movement is humans. The nonhuman is only of interest insofar as it affects humans. Therefore, although the environmental justice movement is often concerned to clean up the environment, at other times it is content to support practices that harm the environment and the nonhuman in support of some human concern, frequently jobs. Never is the environmental justice movement primarily concerned with wilderness. Fundamentally, the environmental justice movement does not support environmental issues that impinge on human interests or rights. Indeed,

the environmental justice movement attacks environmental groups that support wilderness or endangered species as racist and classist. (27)

Placed against the backdrop of global climate change and the collective responses to address it, DeLuca's comments seem, on the one hand, outdated. On the other hand, ongoing efforts by corporations and governments to initiate projects and policies that pitch one interest over the other reinforce the social divisiveness that DeLuca elucidates, just as corporate/environmentalist rhetoric privileges jobs over trees—or over shale or sphagnum, as the case may be. We cannot help but see how this divisiveness in the public realm reflects the seemingly irreconcilable divide between environmental criticism and postcolonial studies in the humanities. The divide emphasises not just disciplinary differences, but also, if indirectly, reveals the challenges of organizing aims and strategies in response to issues often framed in specifically local terms, depending on a given nation's position relative to colonialism. In South Africa, for example, environmentalism tends to be seen as a “white” movement. In a country still very much reeling from exploitative conservation practices, forced removals, and blatantly racist policies, people are very suspicious of any form of environmentalism that values animals above (certain) people. As Lucy tells her father, David Lurie, in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), “Dogs still mean something” (60).

The South African notion that animal rights should not take precedence over human rights was recently illustrated when a comment by President Jacob Zuma about pet ownership sparked a lively public debate. President Zuma dismissed the practice of keeping pets as part of “white culture” and suggested that African tradition is more family-oriented. Following this remark, an Internet meme featuring a photograph of former president Nelson Mandela playing with his pet Rhodesian Ridgeback was widely distributed. Several black South African public figures responded to the photo by posting photographs of themselves being similarly “un-African” by walking their dogs. President Zuma's office issued the following statement: “This is not to say that animals should not be loved or cared for. The message merely emphasised the

need not to elevate our love for our animals above our love for other human beings” (“South Africa’s”). Therefore, any attempt at establishing a specifically South African (and postcolonial) ecocriticism has to acknowledge the tension between the desire to value human need and pressing global environmental concerns.

To date, conversations between postcolonialism and ecocriticism have remained relatively quiet, with a few rare exceptions. Susie O’Brien’s 2010 observation still holds: “[T]he environment still too often enters the conversation as an adjunct to the apparently richer, more progressive (more urban?) debates about postcolonial Canada: that is to say, it gets mentioned in the context of lists of things we should be concerned about, but is not often engaged.” This statement also applies to other national studies. The complexities that divide the two fields in many ways parallel the concerns and tensions between environmental justice and environmentalist movements. The “Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth” seems to suggest a model for dialogue between the two movements, but some scholars remain sceptical of the two movements joining or even whether that unification is desirable. To examine why that turn may be desirable, we again look to the environmental justice debate. In *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*, Phaedra C. Pezzullo and Ronald Sandler suggest that if reconciliation between the two movements is tenuous, the most effective strategy is to form coalitions and capitalise on local and global network opportunities to find equitable compromise between the groups. Yet this reconciliation relies on shifting anthropocentric views and reconceptualising environmentalist preservationist ethics, particularly those that emerge from deep ecology to more dynamic, ecologically-centred views. The benefits of creating such global/local networks, as Joshua A. Dolezal observes, is “to recognize that preserving one place—one migratory bird refuge, one ecosystem—may endanger other places if the threat of extractive industry is not diffused by an alternative economy with more sustainability” (5). In other words, create alliances that interconnect trans-local politics with a biospheric understanding of ecological processes, so that migratory birds whose wetlands are protected

in, say, Port Joli, Nova Scotia are not faced with habitat degraded by industry elsewhere.

Perhaps some form of ecocritical praxis, a strategy that attends to both postcolonial and environmental concerns, can challenge and trouble the privileging of anthropocentrism and the environmentalist exclusions of human concerns by questioning what the consequences may be for de-emphasising one in favour of the other. Together, ecocriticism's study of environmental rhetoric and postcolonialism's "explicitly activist" focus on "historically situated critiques of capitalist ideologies of development" (Huggan 176) can provide a critical and constructive platform from which to interrogate the issues at hand and keep the rhetorical strategies each field deploys transparent. What form of activism or criticism might emerge from such an exchange, though? Reflection and debate on speciesism (privileging the human over other animals) that comes out of the postcolonial/ecocritical debate has done much to "revitalise, or perhaps better . . . re-exten[d] [a] form of humanism—a reaching out beyond the European boundaries of humanist philosophy, or a 'pan-humanism' that enthusiastically accommodates the nonhuman within humanistic thought" (Huggan 178). But what if the text or the environmental justice or environmentalist movement centres on the non-organic—a natural resource, for instance? What does that do to advance discussion of the human and nonhuman?

Our hope with this special issue is that the historical foci of postcolonial and ecocritical studies, as they have been enumerated here and elsewhere, illustrate a shared commitment to addressing these questions by challenging neocolonial ideology. Dynamic in their own right, postcolonialism and ecocriticism together invite students of the twenty-first century—for what are we as scholars if not students of the age?—to remain sceptical and hopeful in the face of significant social, cultural, and biophysical change.

Notes

- 1 Nixon claims that ecocriticism is an "offshoot of American Studies" (234) and that at its inception during the late 1980s and early 1990s scholars tended to study canonical American and predominantly white nature writers such as

Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Dillard, and Abbey. Consequently postcolonialism, Nixon notes, rejected environmental critical concerns “implicitly as, at best, irrelevant and elitist, at worst sullied by ‘green imperialism’” (235).

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